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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN ELECTION COUNTDOWN - OPPOSITION PARTY SPECIAL

REF: DUSHANBE 0509

CLASSIFIED BY: NECIA L. QUAST, Charge' d Affairs, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In advance of February, 2010 Parliamentary elections, Tajik opposition parties are initiating hopeful campaigns despite systemic obstacles and their own disorganization. The Islamic Renaissance Party plans to run an active, national campaign with appeal beyond its religious base while staying on the government's good side. The Communist Party is bullish on its election prospects and not afraid to vocalize opposition to entrenched policies. The secular, Democratic parties are splintered and can hope to win a single Parliamentary seat, at best, if they can unite their supporters. While most opposition leaders are skeptical that President Rahmon will fulfill his pledge to be "guarantor" of free and fair elections, they all plan to participate in the elections at all levels and call on the international community to ensure that the Tajik government allows a fair poll. END SUMMARY.

A STACKED DECK

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¶2. (C) In February 2010, Tajikistan will hold elections to local district (rayon) councils, regional (oblast) parliaments and the Majlisi Namoyamdagon: the 63-member lower house of the national parliament. The outgoing Majlisi Namoyamdagon is dominated by President Rahmon's pro-government party, the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), which holds 46 seats (another 8 seats are held by nominally independent deputies who vote with the PDPT). Twenty-two deputies to the Majlisi Namoyamdagon are elected via party list, while 41 are elected based on individual mandates from electoral districts. International organizations remain involved in promoting fair elections: USAID awarded a \$360,000 elections grant to IFES, which will provide voter education, train political parties, and organize six political debates. The OSCE and EU are rolling out elections initiatives, including debates. The ability of debate organizers to secure time on Tajik television stations will be a key test of the government's pledge to hold fair elections.

¶3. (C) Leaders of opposition parties list numerous obstacles to free and fair polls, including limited access to television, biased local election commissions, and onerous candidacy fees. According to Tajik law, each party is allotted 30 minutes of airtime during election season, which is the only television coverage the opposition parties receive in five years. Local election commissions, which run polling stations and certify initial vote totals, are generally made up of low-level civil servants who take their orders from the government-appointed local administrator (hukumat). Democratic and Social Democratic

party leaders said that a new 7,000 somoni (roughly \$1,600) filing fee for each candidate to the Majlisi Namoyamdaгон will limit their ability to finance campaigns, as the country's average income is \$60.

ISLAMIC RENNAISSANCE PARTY: LIGHT BLUE FOR VICTORY...

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¶4. (C) The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was once considered to be the most viable political challenger to the PDPT, but has not used the two seats it won in the 2005 Parliamentary election to organize opposition to any major government initiatives, including the restrictive Law on Religion. The IRPT's reticence has led many observers to conclude that it is no longer an "opposition party." Independent Majlisi Milli (Upper House) Deputy Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda said the IRPT hopes to be granted an additional couple of seats in the 2010 polls as a reward for its good behavior. The IRPT has 33,000 members, but the Party claims an additional 40,000 supporters.

¶5. (C) IRPT Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri oozed optimism in a meeting with Poloff, declaring that IRPT candidates will compete in both party list and individual mandate seats throughout the country. "We are ready for the elections." Taking a page from the color movements in the Former Soviet Union, Kabiri said the IRPT will dress its activists in "light blue" rather than Islamic green to send a message that the "We look at life more broadly than it seems." The Party hopes to distribute blue scarves to its supporters during its campaign and disseminate party messages via email and text messages. While Kabiri is looking to procure

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better quality campaign materials outside Tajikistan, he fears that customs officials may create barriers or additional fees when the Party tries to import them.

...WHILE MAINTAINING ITS GOOD BEHAVIOR

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¶6. (C) The IRPT recently announced it would buy shares in the government's Roghun hydroelectric dam project after officials called for the public to chip in to help finance the initiative. Other opposition party leaders interpreted this "good behavior" as an effort by Kabiri to curry the President's good will before election season. Kabiri explained the proposed stock purchase was merely the Party's "symbolic gesture of support for the Tajik people." The main IRPT issues in the campaign would be fighting corruption, labor migration, religion, separation of powers within the government, and civil rights. The IRPT was not seeking to form a coalition with other political parties.

¶7. (C) Though the IRPT plans to wage an active campaign, Kabiri said he does not "have any illusions that the elections will be conducted like those in Europe," as the law in place during the fixed 2005 Parliamentary elections has not been changed, despite formal request for revision made by opposition parties. Nevertheless, Kabiri hoped President Rahmon would honor his pledge to run a fair election in 2010, noting Rahmon's public call for local officials to ensure an honest vote count. If election results are fixed, as in 2005, Kabiri said the IRPT's response would be "within the framework of the law." "We will likely not organize any demonstrations as the government does not approve such requests. We will hope the elections will be

free. We have never been pessimists about our work."

KABIRI: "TIE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO CONDUCT OF FAIR ELECTIONS"

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18. (C) Kabiri was pessimistic about the international community's ability to help. "No way. After all that money spent during the 2005 elections on training, monitoring, and discussions, the elections were worse than ever before." Funding for such initiatives was money poorly spent, as election legitimacy would largely depend on the government's decision whether or not to fix the results. To Kabiri, the very idea of sending election observers to Tajikistan is "absurd. The problem is not that election officials don't know how to count. They know how to count. It would be better if you spent this money to build an orphanage or a hospital." The only way to insure a fair election was for the international community, with a unified voice, to tie its economic assistance to unbiased conduct of the Parliamentary elections. "The government has acquired immunity to oral criticism. It has tremendous patience in that regard. But it will listen to a real threat to its economic existence."

COMMUNISTS: WE WILL TAKE 5 SEATS, MINIMUM!

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19. (C) The Communist Party of Tajikistan has emerged as the most active dissenting voice in the outgoing Majlisi Namoyamdagon and hopes to expand its four deputy caucus. Its leader, Shodi Shabdolov, has directly criticized the government's budget and energy policies, including the provision of a massive share of Tajikistan's electricity to the state-managed aluminum company, TALCO. The party has avoided openly challenging the President, however Deputy party leader Jabbor Ahmedov is one of only two parliamentarians who, in the 2005 elections, upset a government-backed candidate to win a seat in the lower house.

110. (C) Ahmedov, who participated in a USG-sponsored exchange program in 2007, welcomed renewed contact with the U.S. Embassy. "It has been too long since we met with our American comrades." He proudly touted the Communists "democratic" credentials. "We

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have always stood up and been active in the Majlisi Namoyamdagon. It is just that the media doesn't always cover the most heated parts of the debate." Ahmedov said the Communist Party, claiming 40,000 members, would compete in the February elections at all levels, focusing on economic and political reform. Ahmedov is bullish about the party's prospects. "We will take five seats, minimum! We will take up to ten in the Sughd Oblast Parliament." Sughd boasts a relatively open media market, which Ahmedov plans to employ to reach the Party's base. Ahmedov said he had no problem getting on television in Sughd.

PRESIDENT RAHMON'S ELECTION PLEDGE: "NOT EMPTY WORDS"

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111. (C) Rahmon recently made a public pledge to be the

"guarantor" of fair elections and ordered local officials to not meddle in the polls. Ahmedov said the pledge was "not just empty words." Yet those words do not appear to have helped him in practice: he failed to get amendments to the 2005 elections law through Parliament that would have made the 2010 polls more transparent. "We are going to start next year working toward a new election law for 2015." Ahmedov said the main impediment to fully democratic elections was the disorganization of the parties themselves and general public ignorance of voting procedures and rights. "The time for the political parties to start preparing for elections is right after the election, years ahead. I told the OSCE in 2007 that we needed to start training election observers and voters. Now it is three months before the election and they are just starting to talk about it." He added that it would be difficult for opposition parties and outside observers to monitor all of the country's 3,000 polling stations.

#### NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S COMMUNIST

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¶12. (C) Ahmedov proudly noted that his time with U.S. Representatives improved his ability to engage his constituents. "I don't know if I will compete for my district seat or through our party list, but I am going to get out there and campaign, distribute my election program and win. I ran on such a program in 2005. While I didn't achieve all of it, I did achieve 75 percent. And I am going to publish it in the newspaper. One of my constituents said, 'We would vote for you even if you accomplished 25 percent.'"

¶13. (C) Ahmedov's political reviews reflect the Tajik Communist Party's shifting ideology 18 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. He called for selling off run-down state enterprises that have been a drain on the economy since independence. "We have 140 big subsidies that need to be examined and possibly removed." He also raised the alarming dropout rates of female students, calling for mandatory study for all students through the twelfth grade. (Currently girls are allowed to drop out after the ninth grade.) He conceded that "it was a mistake for the Soviet Union to oppose religion. There needs to be a balance. For now, the President's policies to support religion are not a violation of the secular constitution." When Poloff raised the planned construction of the largest mosque in Central Asia, Ahmedov replied, "If there is no building, the government dies."

#### SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY: LAST STAND OF THE LAWYERS

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¶14. (C) The Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), supported by intellectuals in Dushanbe, Khujand, and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), is known as the "Party of Lawyers" and is the last secular, democratic, independent opposition party standing after the government-engineered collapse of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT). The party, with 6,850 members, is dominated by its quixotic founder, Rahmatillo Zoyirov, whose public

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statements range from declaring the government illegitimate to calling for the President to appoint him Minister of Justice as a political "compromise." In recent press interviews, Zoyirov proposed that the President appoint a representative from each

of the eight legal political parties to the Majlisi Milli, presumably including Zoyirov. These statements keep him in the independent press, but as he admitted to Poloff, only 5% of the Tajik population reads newspapers. In a response to Zoyirov's public call for pre-election debates, the chairman of the President's party declared "We are open at all levels to defending our positions."

¶15. (C) According to Zoyirov, the SDPT will compete in the elections as a party list and strategically run candidates for individual mandate seats in areas where it has significant support, such as GBAO. He complained of the party's restricted access to media, recalling that, of the 30 minutes of television time allotted to the SDPT in 2005, the government cut two minutes in which Zoyirov directly criticized Rahmon. He said few Tajiks viewed even this truncated broadcast, since it was not announced in advance, and many voters were experiencing a power outage during its airtime. In contrast, Zoyirov claimed the government ensured that there was power throughout the country during the message of the President's PDPT, which was well advertised in advance.

¶16. (C) Although Zoyirov believes the President fixes the outcomes of most races in advance, there is "a fight for the 10 percent" up for grabs. He called for international observers, but said all poll monitors should hold the same standards, as CIS monitors regularly praise elections deemed bogus by the OSCE. Zoyirov was vague on his party's outreach strategy, saying only the SDPT would pursue on-line media. He complained that the 7,000 somoni per candidate registration fee would limit the SDPT's ability to wage a campaign, adding that his personal bank account is the main funding source for the party's activities.

DEMOCRATIC PARTY: DOWN AND OUT IN THE JAILED LEADER'S APARTMENT

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¶17. (C) The Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) was founded in 1990 as the country's first democratic opposition party, but has fallen on hard times since the government imprisoned its founder, Muhammadruzi Iskandarov, in December 2005. After Iskandarov was sentenced to 25 years for crimes against the state, the government appointed Masud Sobirov as the DPT's chairman. Considered a government stooge by most DPT members, Sobirov has legal control of the party; he is known as "a general with no troops."

¶18. (C) Poloff met with Rahmatullo Valiyev, the tired, bitter, and angry representative of Iskandarov's remaining supporters, in the jailed leader's apartment. Valiyev said Iskandarov's supporters will decide how to approach the February elections at an upcoming party meeting. Some DPT members may seek to form a coalition with the SDPT or run as SDPT members. Compared to the 2005 election, Valiyev believes "the 2010 election will be worse because Rahmon now knows he is unaccountable." Valiyev complained that the international community has given Rahmon a blank check to create an authoritarian state in the interest of maintaining stability next to Afghanistan. Valiyev said Iskandarov was treated well in confinement because the government knew his case was being followed by the international community. Iskandarov knew he would not be included in the recently announced Presidential amnesty of 10,000 prisoners. In any event, according to Valiyev, Iskandarov does not want to be amnestied as he has not committed any crime in the first place.

¶19. (C) The remaining three legal political parties, the Socialist Party of Tajikistan (SPT), the Agrarian Party of Tajikistan (APT) and Party of Economic Development of Tajikistan (PEDT), are small pro-government parties. Like the Democratic Party, the SPT split when the Ministry of Justice declared the legal head of the party to be a pro-Rahmon loyalist, in this case notorious alcoholic Abduhalim Ghaffarov. These parties have largely served as vehicles for self-promotion. The Chair

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of the PEDT was named Minister of Transportation in October as a reward for his party's public support of government policies. If one of these parties wins a seat in the Majlisi Namoyamdaon, it should be interpreted as an attempt by the government to simulate parliamentary pluralism.

¶20. (C) COMMENT: On paper, the elections look to be a three-party race, as the Communists and Islamic Renaissance Party each hope to peel a few seats from the ruling PDPT's super-majority. While there is no precedent for a free and fair democratic election in Tajikistan, it is heartening that opposition parties have managed to stay alive and plan campaigns for the February elections. It is also positive that the leader of the PDPT declared his party "open to debates," but it is doubtful that the PDPT will follow through by allowing opposition parties to air their views in a national forum. On the whole, despite the spirited statements by the opposition, the consistent national mood is that the Parliament after February will look a lot like the Parliament now: stacked with Rahmon's cronies. In fact, not a few political observers believe the winners of individual seats have already been chosen, and the elections themselves will be something less than even a pro forma exercise. The Embassy will nevertheless continue to work with the OSCE and EU to vigorously raise the issue of elections with the government in the lead-up to the polls and to underline the importance of free elections to the international community. END COMMENT.

QUAST